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SUBJECT: ETHIOPIAN FORMIN CALLS FOR SENIOR BILATERAL TALKS TO CLARIFY U.S. POLICY TOWARD ETHIOPIA

REF: ADDIS 257

SUMMARY

¶1. (SBU) Ethiopian Foreign Minister Seyoum Mesfin called in Ambassador and USAID/Ethiopia Mission Director February 20 to officially protest Congress' listing of Ethiopia in last year's foreign operations appropriations bill (section 620) with 20 other countries -- including Sudan, Zimbabwe and Iran -- for mandatory submission of a special congressional notification (CN) before assistance can be disbursed. Seyoum, reflecting the consensus view of the ruling party and the government leadership, said the U.S. is altering its view of Ethiopia as an important partner in Africa. He expressed deep disappointment that Ethiopia would be lumped in a category with Zimbabwe and Sudan as the only Sub-Saharan African countries, not to mention Iran and Cuba, requiring such a special notification. If the U.S. has altered its view of Ethiopia, the Foreign Minister requested immediate senior level bilateral meetings in Washington or in Addis.

¶2. (SBU) The Ambassador replied that the GoE was completely misreading the Foreign Operations bill, and reminded Seyoum that the bill was passed last July under the Bush Administration, which Ethiopia's leadership viewed as more supportive of Ethiopia. Further, Ethiopia is one of the largest recipients of U.S. foreign assistance and the special CN requirement enforces what is already the usual procedure for bilateral assistance for Ethiopia. The Ambassador cautioned that the United States Government's new Africa foreign policy team has not been named yet and that it will take time before there can be senior bilateral meetings. Ambassador highlighted that recent talks with the acting Assistant Secretary (reftel) reflects the Administration's views. More important, the Ambassador raised concerns that the U.S. has in general with Ethiopia over human rights (especially the arrest of opposition leader Birtukan Midekssa) and democratic governance issues which will continue to be a focus for the Congress. The Foreign Minister said he welcomed such discussions because it would be between two good friends. But the listing of Ethiopia in the Foreign Operations bill was a deep concern for Ethiopia. End Summary.

ETHIOPIA CALLS FOR SENIOR LEVEL BILATERAL DIALOGUE

¶3. (SBU) Foreign Minister Seyoum, accompanied by Chief of Staff Mulugeta and Director General for Europe and the Americas Tesfaye Yilma, called in Ambassador and USAID/Ethiopia Mission Director Glenn Anders on February 20 to protest U.S. Congressional action, calling it reflective of a changed attitude by the U.S. government towards Ethiopia. The Foreign Minister cited the 2008 Foreign Operations Appropriations Bill, section 620 in which 20 countries, including Ethiopia, were designated for "special notification requirements." This one paragraph in a long appropriations bill

requires the submission of a congressional notification prior to disbursement of any assistance for Ethiopia. While Mexico, Serbia, Pakistan are also listed, the Foreign Minister focused on Iran, Cuba, and the African countries of Sudan and Zimbabwe to express Ethiopia's "deep disappointment and unhappiness" with the Congressional designation.

¶ 14. (SBU) Seyoum stated that Ethiopia felt it had a "special" relationship with the U.S. on security and regional political issues, and close cooperation on anti-poverty efforts. Zimbabwe and Sudan are pariah states which oppose the U.S. while Ethiopia and the U.S. have a close relationship. He called USAID a "great friend" and questioned the change in attitude by the U.S. "The single paragraph must reflect a new perspective by the U.S. towards Ethiopia," Seyoum stated. Seyoum added that Ethiopia wants "predictability" in the U.S. relationship. To clearly understand if Ethiopia is important to the U.S. there should be consistency in statements and policy. Finally, Seyoum said he welcomed senior bilateral discussions either in Washington or in Addis Ababa and urged that they be conducted soon.

MISREADING OF CONGRESSIONAL ACTION...

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¶ 15. (SBU) USAID/Ethiopia Mission Director Anders noted that U.S. assistance for Ethiopia has reached historic highs in the past year with about one billion dollars in aid to Ethiopia, and that development and humanitarian collaboration, particularly relationships with counterpart ministries and new ministers, had never been closer. The Director and Ambassador argued that the section 620 language reflects only a brief paragraph in a very long

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appropriations bill. The Ambassador noted to Seyoum that the bill was not a recent congressional action, but rather was taken last summer when the previous U.S. Administration remained in office. Further, senior level meetings may take time pending the selection and Senate confirmation of the new Assistant Secretary.

...BUT, THERE ARE U.S. CONCERNS

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¶ 16. (SBU) Ambassador noted deep concerns by Congress over human rights and democracy issues in Ethiopia and emphasized that these issues are of concern to the new Administration as well, noting the recent visit by the acting Assistant Secretary who raised questions on human rights and democratic governance. Seyoum said Ethiopia welcomes such discussions because it would be between friends and that it is, Ethiopia hopes, a mature relationship in which such issues can be discussed. But the Foreign Minister returned to his message that he and his government were disappointed in the change in policy towards Ethiopia by the U.S.

COMMENT

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¶ 17. (SBU) The meeting was very brief and somber. Foreign Minister Seyoum was clearly not willing to listen to explanations but to transmit a specific problem. As reported previously based on the Ambassador's private discussions with the Prime Minister and broader Embassy reporting, the ruling EPRDF party and the leadership of the GoE have concerns that the new U.S. Administration will bring a changed policy position which stresses human rights and overlooks security and regional stability, which the Ethiopians feel is the basis of the U.S.-Ethiopian relationship.

¶ 18. (SBU) Acting Assistant Secretary Carter raised human rights issues with Prime Minister Meles recently -- which reflects the growing concerns in Congress as well as in the new Administration -- the treatment of the opposition, passage of restrictive laws, narrowing of political space, and restrictions on NGOs dealing with advancing democratic values. While the Foreign Minister argued that he welcomed such discussions, the Prime Minister and other leaders in both the ruling party and government have been defensive to questions posed by the Ambassador and Embassy staff on democratic and human rights issues. Post believes that senior bilateral talks

in Washington would be appropriate and necessary but we should also expect that relations with Ethiopia will be challenging in the coming year as we push the Ethiopian Government on political and economic reforms and as we head into 2010 national elections. End Comment.

YAMAMOTO